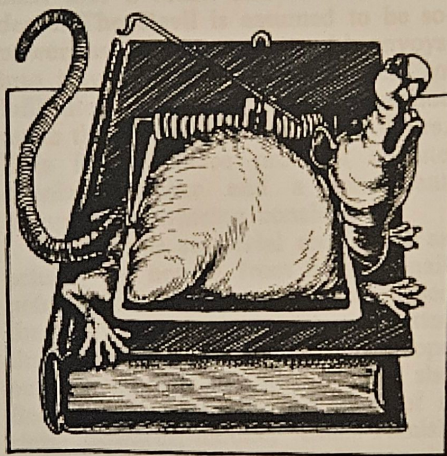


Theater/John Simon

DON'T PLAY US AT ALL

"...Van Peebles's new play abandons hate for joy...this would appear laudable, but proves less appealing than its opposite..."

There are still many places where the black man's lot is hard, unjust and unenviable. In the New York theater, however, it is not hard and unenviable, merely unjust. There Melvin Van Peebles, a black man of virtually no talent whatever (unless self-promotion be counted as one), manages to have two musicals of zero value running concurrently on Broadway. I wrote briefly and dismissively about *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death*: a bunch of untuneful, gratingly monotonous and generally hate-riddled Van Peebles songs, fairly cleverly illustrated with stage movements devised by Gilbert Moses, pasted together and, without anything resembling a book, served up as a musical. When the Tony awards came along, this bookless, graceless musical was nominated in every conceivable category, including one inconceivable one: Best Musical Comedy



duet. So far, so passable; we assume that we are heading for an animal fable with music, a genre that would be relatively new on Broadway, and might yield some whimsical, hortatory fun. But, presently, the two pests complain

bollic imp shows up to unstraighten out the first one, he, too, very nearly falls—for the wise and lovable aunt; but he remains unconverted and pays for it. The party itself is an excuse for bringing on an assortment of black stereotypes and having them crudely manipulated by obvious song cues into even more obvious songs—this time more of the gospel variety, as opposed to the jazzier nonscore for *Ain't*. The music ranges from the platitudinous to the mercilessly teased-out and unmusical; Harold Wheeler's able orchestrations try valiantly to make silky purrs out of rasps more suited to a sow's ear.

But the greater disaster is the words, both book and lyrics. They turn the principal characters into nonentities, while leaving the lesser ones insulting clichés. I shudder to think what would have been said of a white author, had he portrayed blacks like this. The writ-

conceivable one: Best Musical Comedy Book. Clearly, if it hadn't been a little black book, it wouldn't have had a Chinaman's chance. Interestingly, *Aint* didn't win a single, measly Tony.

What is the basis for Van Peebles's reputation? Three movies, all of them critical and audience flops, and *Aint*, which has been kept huffing and puffing to papered houses by puffery such as having black celebrities like Shirley Chisholm take over a part for an evening, by white foundation monies being poured into it, and by uncritical raves from awed white uncritics. So now we get a new Van Peebles musical, **Dont Play Us Cheap**. This does not resemble *Aint* in any way, except that, from *aint* to *dont*, it continues Van Peebles's war on that white chauvinist status symbol, the apostrophe. Otherwise, the new show differs in that it has a book, and that, abandoning the previous message of hatred for whitey, it proposes to celebrate the joy of being black. These apparently laudable undertakings prove, in the event, even less appealing than their opposites.

Dont Play Us Cheap starts out with a rat and a cockroach crawling through a hole in the wall beside a huge, i.e., man-sized door, and with the rat intoning a general lament about his and the roach's life, which turns into a comic—but still totally unmelodious—song

But, presently, the two pests complain about their own worst plague: the Devil's imps assuming the shapes of rats and roaches to wreak havoc on human beings, for which innocent, real rats and roaches are persecuted. Forthwith, Aesop is forgotten, and we get a tenuous story about two minor devil's advocates who, from rat and roach, change into men to break up more efficiently a happy Saturday-night party in Harlem. One of them is won over by love to remain human and humane; the other, unreconstructed, changes back into a roach and is swatted to death. The Devil is assumed to be so powerless as to have to turn his envoys into tiny creatures to enable them to infiltrate human residences; he cannot make them pass through locked doors. This feeble device provides a cute opening number and a convenient though unconvincing conclusion.

The plot is so trivial and banal as actually to benefit from a thumbnail précis: the young girl whose aunt gives the party falls in love with the better little devil and he with her; he stops being a metaphysical saboteur and she finally prefers him to the scion of a rich, upwardly-mobile, Uncle-Tomish family, who become the laughingstocks of the party. Mostly stock, to be exact, for there is very little laughing in Van Peebles's book. When the more dia-

he portrayed blacks like this. The writing ranges from a devil's saying, "When I give her what she really wants, all hell will break loose," to the aunt's remarking about her modest social status, "It may not look like much to you, but you just don't know how far back I had to start;" in other words, from the indubitable bottom to dubious heights. There is an abundance of apothegms like "If you aint [*sic*, no doubt] got rip-off in your heart, the Devil cant [*ditto*] rip you off." The singing is exuberant but untidy; the acting, for the most part, amateurish. Many sung words are indecipherable; there are even performers, like Robert Dunn, whose very spoken words remain impenetrable. Joe Keyes, Jr. is so wooden in the male lead that he must have confused a devil with a cigar-store Indian. Even the experienced Avon Long, as his diabolic cohort, is at best a deviled ham. Only Esther Rolle and Rhetta Hughes, as aunt and niece, perform with style. And Van Peebles the director makes still less of what little Van Peebles the playwright provides.

Black theater—like any other—is to be allowed and helped to grow. But it is not the tired formulas and tin ear of Melvin Van Peebles that will bear fruit. The current show—merely shows that if there is anything drearier than Van Peebles's hate, it is Van Peebles's love. ■

Illustrated by Jan Faust

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